Azure and Claude (2016 Rewrite)

A revised version of Fafoo's 2ch story "The Simple Job of Driving People to Suicide," AKA Azure and Claude. This version evidently served as a base for the manga, though that also seems to have some differences of its own.

Like the original version, be wary about the topics of suicide involved.

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1.
My job mostly entailed cleaning rooms.

Why would I go cleaning other people's rooms?
Because it comes along with suicide.

Get the room clean and leave a note, and no one will be suspicious of a suicide.
Making it all tidy. That's the important part.

The procedure is as follows.

1. Take over the target's body.
2. Hint at suicide.
3. Tidy up the room.
4. Write a note.
5. Commit suicide.

And so, if asked my profession, I would call myself a "Cleaner."
Which was, of course, true in more ways than one.

2.
I recall it was my twentieth birthday when I gained the ability to control other people's bodies.

There were no prior signs, no logic to it at all.
That day, I suddenly understood I had the power to manipulate others.

And at the same time, a "target's" face arose in the back of my head.
A voice in my head said, "dispose of them, and make it look like suicide."

And so from that day forth, I was a Cleaner.
Over the course of three months, I dealt with six targets.

3.
The seventh target was a girl with nervous eyes.

I was surprised upon learning she was my next target.
That is to say, all the people I'd made commit suicide thus far had been visibly evil at a glance; I'd never had such a young and harmless-looking target before.

So delicate, she might break if you pushed her.
So pale, she might stain if you touched her.
And always looking out at something far in the distance.
That's the kind of girl she was.

But you can't let appearances deceive you.
No doubt there was a suitable reason for why she became a target.
Perhaps she had committed some kind of crime in the past.
For all I knew, maybe she'd killed two or three people in cold blood.

I closed my eyes, and from a distant location, I pictured the target's face and took over her body.

It was a sunny day in July.
At the time, I had not an inkling that this would be my final job.

4.
The target was gazing out the window.

She was in a high school classroom. Which appeared to be in session.
All the students were busily taking notes.

Meanwhile, my target alone lazily rested her chin in her hands, gazing outside.

Not that there was anything very interesting out the window.
Just a peaceful, rural landscape.

5.
I attempted to control the target's hand.

To test the accuracy of my control, I carefully tried copying from the blackboard.
The pen in her hand felt strangely large.
I suppose that told me how small the girl's hands were.
But I quickly got used to the oddity, and was able to control her body with similar precision to my own.

I looked up and met eyes with the teacher, who was giving the target a surprised look.
I would understand the meaning behind his expression shortly.

6.
To determine the target's attitude, I wrote "Hello" in her notebook, then temporarily relinquished control back to her.

The target opened and closed her hand, confirming her body had been freed.
She seemed aware she was being controlled.

The target stared curiously at the "Hello" her own hand had written.
She displayed no further reaction.

7.
The lecture ended, and lunch break began.
I took over the target's body once more.
This is when things would really begin.

2. Hint at suicide.
It was first necessary to show the target's acquaintances and friends the appearance of her suffering.

Sigh more often, complain about not being able to sleep lately, speak less, say things that weren't normal.

By leaving implications in the corners of her words, her suicide would have a sense of reality after the fact.
"Thinking about it now, those were signs of a suicide."

8.
I looked around the classroom in search of the target's friends.

However, not a single person came up to talk to her, nor even looked in her direction.
Everyone went into their own groups and had lunch.

I continued to wait patiently for someone to speak to her.
I thought that if I did, someone would notice she was all alone and come talk.

9.
Thirty minutes into lunch break, the target was still left utterly alone.

That's when I finally realized.
It was very much the natural way of this classroom that this girl was isolated.

It appeared my new target was a definite "loner."

10.
I thought this might be a problem.
But thinking it over, it was actually opportune.
A "loner" could die any time at all, and it would be persuasive enough.

An interviewer asks:
"What was that girl who committed suicide like?"

The classmates respond:
"She was quiet, and no one knew what she was thinking."

I could picture that easily.

I decided to leave her alone for a while.
There was nothing for me to do, after all.
I temporarily released control of the target.

Because without any interference, she would play the part of an ideal "girl likely to kill herself" for me.

11.
I was controlling the target from an apartment room.
I could take over someone's body from anywhere as long as I knew their face.

I set my alarm and began an afternoon nap.
Controlling people requires unbelievable stamina.

My next job was the most taxing, the "cleanup."
I would have to keep my physical condition up for that.

12.
I woke up and checked on the target.
It seemed her last class had just ended.

The target left the classroom before anyone else.
It didn't seem she was in any clubs.

Putting in earbuds for a Walkman, she headed straight home, taking no detours.

As the target returned home and entered her room, I took over her body once more.
3. Tidy up the room.
I looked said room over, through the target's eyes.

My honest first impression was, "What IS this?"

13.
I was briefly at a loss.
I was to tidy things up, but there was nothing in the room to tidy - nothing but a bare minimum of furniture.

No magazines, no books, no television, no computer, no cosmetics, no cushions, no stuffed animals, nothing at all.
It was a horribly barren room, entirely unbefitting of a girl her age.

14.
Even with my experience, this step could take over five hours depending on the state of the room.
In her case, it was over in a mere two minutes.

The only trash in the room was beer bottles.
There were a few stuffed away in a bottom drawer.

I began to put the bottles in a bag, but then I gave it some thought.
Leaving them where they were seemed better for presenting it as a suicide, so I put them back in place.

15.
There were actually a few things that indicated her humanity.
For instance, the CDs scattered on her shelves.

Aretha Franklin, Janis Joplin, Billie Holiday, Bessie Smith.
Definitely the tastes of a gloomy person.

These also seemed to help the presentation just as they were, so I left them alone.

Also, there was a decorative plant on the veranda.
However, it wasn't a pretty flower or anything, but a plain thing with an unusual pattern.
I decided to leave this alone for the same reason as the CDs.

And that was the end of the cleanup.
My work had never gone so smoothly before.

There would be likely be no problem committing suicide right this moment.
It seemed better not to try anything fancy.

16.
4. Write a note.

To finish up, I wrote a suicide note with the target's hand.
Tearing out a page from a history textbook, I wrote "I hate myself, so I'm going to die."

I just felt that if this girl were to write a suicide note, it would be something like this.

17.
I put the note in her pocket, and was about to leave the house.

Suddenly, the target showed her first opposition.
And it was, in fact, unbelievably powerful.
She very nearly took control back.

"Wait," the target managed to speak.
Since she forced her mouth's movement against my control, the edge of her mouth was cut and bled a little.

Besides surprise, I was somewhat relieved.
I'd been feeling like things were going disgustingly well.

Now, beg for your life, I thought.
Just what will I get to hear, I wonder?

18.
The target said this:
"I want you to make a little change to the note."

19.
Instead of speaking myself, I had the target speak.
"What do you mean?"
An observer would have seen her talking to herself.

The target replied:
"Could you change it to "I hate everything, so I'm going to die"?"

"...Why?"

"I want people to think "It's for the best that she died." If that's possible."

20.
I was silent for a while, but figured that was fine, and amended the note as she instructed.

"Thank you very much," she said.

It seemed the job was to end without her pleading at all.
What could this girl be thinking?

That was when I came to a certain theory.

21.
Perhaps this target, long before I even laid eyes on her, was already intending to kill herself?

She'd cleaned out her room, decided what to put in her suicide note, but perhaps just hadn't taken the final step?
It would have explained the unnaturally clean room, and her utter lack of resistance.

If my hypothesis was correct, what I was doing was like pushing the back of someone longing for death, killing them as they desired.
I'd just be like a volunteer.

22.
That was not what I wanted.
It's boring to kill people who long to die.
It didn't please me to feel like she was using me.
I hated being used by others more than anything.

Before I killed her, I'd tease this girl a little.

Somehow, I would make her say "I don't want to die."
Drag those words out of her own mouth. And then I would kill her.
That's what I decided upon.

Thinking about it, this was the first time I'd let personal affairs into my work.

I took over the target's body, crumpled up the note, and threw it in the trash.
On a separate paper, I wrote "I'm staying at a friend's house," put it on the living room table, and left the house with only her wallet.

23.
At night, the town was under a shroud of bugs buzzing.
It was a humid night that made you start to sweat even if you stood still.

I controlled the target to make her walk through that sweltering heat for hours on end.

It was also a port town with many hills and stairs, so her stamina visibly dwindled.
Her body became sweaty, and her slender legs started to tremble.

As time passed, she got thirsty, hungry, and fatigued.
Her vision narrowed, and the scenery grew faint.
With each step, she came to feel unbearable pain.

I didn't care, and had her keep walking.

24.
After climbing hills and stairs for hours and hours, the target suddenly looked up to see a viewing platform at the top of the town.

With a leaden gait, she climbed the spiral stairs to the roof.
Climbing over the safety fence, she stood at the edge of the platform.

Letting go of the fence, she looked down at the ground.
Her legs buckled at the dizzying height.

With just one more step, it would all end.

She took that step.
Her leg cut through the air, and her body fell forward.

The target shut her eyes tight to prepare for death.

25.
But a moment later, the target's body was powerfully pulled back to the other side of the fence.

She didn't seem to understand what had happened.
Timidly opening her eyes and realizing she'd been saved, she dropped to the ground.

Then she slowly elevated her gaze, and met eyes with the person who saved her from falling.

"Aren't you relieved I saved you?", I said.
She stared at my face, her jaw hanging open.

26.
After a while, the target opened her mouth.
"So you were the one controlling me?"
"Yeah," I nodded.

"Then please, kill me right away," she said, without batting an eye.

Hearing that only further convinced me.
Even if it was stubborn, now I really wouldn't be satisfied unless I could get her to say "I don't want to die."

I picked up the target whose legs had given out.
I carefully descended the spiral stairs, and threw her into the back seat of my car.

"...Am I being kidnapped?", the target asked.
"Quiet," I said, and started the car.

27.
At the apartment, I took the target to my room and ordered her to take a shower.

The target grimaced as if just catching on, but she obeyed with resignation, giving me no complaint-like complaints.
She must have understood it was pointless to resist.

I went to get the target's clothes and put them in the washing machine, then replaced them with a bath towel and another change of clothes.

Then I went to the kitchen and cooked using what was left in the fridge.
Before long, the target came out of the bathroom, and I ordered her to eat.

She looked between the food and me with bewilderment, but eventually picked up the chopsticks and began carrying the food to her mouth.

28.
After eating, the target asked me:
"...Why are you doing this? Shouldn't you just kill me quickly?"

"You feel like you're living, don't you?"

"...Um?" She blinked her eyes.

"A hot shower for your exhausted body, tasty food for your empty stomach.
You must be feeling a sense of satisfaction you can't deny."

The target gazed at me wordlessly.

"I want you to die as fearfully as possible.
So I think I'm going to take away every possible positive aspect to dying, leaving none behind."

The target pondered something with her eyes lowered, but soon started to nod off, and fell asleep on top of the table.
I gently carried her to bed, careful not to wake her.

The target seemed to sleep very soundly.
I'll keep teaching her the joys of living one by one, I thought.
Every time she learns one of life's positives, she should grow more fearful of her death.
Imagining her face twisted in fear, I grinned.

29.
The next morning, the target woke up and said as she saw me, "Now, let's continue from yesterday."
She extended her hands to me and stared into my eyes.
"You will kill me, won't you?"

I glared at her a little.
"Right, I'll kill you soon. In a very terrible way."

"A very terrible way?"

"Yeah. Look forward to it."
What a weird girl, I thought.
A normal person would surely be baffled by this situation, but she seemed to accept it with no difficulty.

30.
I made a simple breakfast, and we ate.
Then I drove the target back to her house, and once she was ready, I took her to school.

"Do you like school?", I asked.
The target replied hoarsely.
"I hate it. The whole system, everyone in class, all of it."

"Are you lonely not having anyone around?"
"No. I like to be alone."
"I see," I nodded. "I'll take it into consideration."

After getting out of the car, the target turned around, bowed her head to me, and walked toward the building.
Oblivious to what was about to happen.

31.
I parked the car in the parking lot of a nearby store, reclined the seat, and closed my eyes.

The target was just entering the classroom.
Surely this place was a major dislike of hers.
She stopped in front of the door and hesitated.

After a long pause, she bravely put her hand on the door.

As she entered, some nearby students reflexively turned toward the target.
Just then, her expression suddenly brightened, and she greeted them with "Morning!"

Naturally, this was my doing.

No one around her responded to her greeting.
Though it didn't seem as if they ignored it.
No one had even dreamed of her greeting them, so they likely decided they just misheard.

The target's face was flushed red.
She couldn't help but be embarrassed.

She was fine with being killed, but couldn't handle having her greeting ignored.
That's how it was.

32.
The target sat down, took out a pen and notebook, and wrote "Please stop" to plead with me.
I borrowed her hand to reply, "I refuse."

As class started, the target put her elbows on the desk and began gazing out the window, ignoring the teacher.
Without delay, I took control, and wrote the instruction "Take the class seriously" in her notebook.

The target glared at my message, but eventually took the pen in defeat and started taking notes.
The teacher at the podium, noticing the target using her notebook, stared as if she was witnessing a

miracle.
She must have normally had a very poor attitude in class.

33.
At lunch break, the target went off to eat by herself.
But I couldn't possibly let such a golden opportunity slip by.

I took over her body, approached a small group of girls eating nearby, and said "Um..."

The girls all looked toward her at once.
I had the target put on a nice smile, then said:

"Is it okay if I sit here?"

The girls looked at each other in disbelief.
"T-That's fine...", one timidly answered.
Under my manipulation, the target smiled and said "Thanks."

I knew her face was visibly reddening from shyness.

34.
I kept manipulating the target in this way all day.

Once classes were over, the target left the classroom before anyone else.
She must have figured my pestering would continue as long as she was at school.

Her legs carried her directly home, but I wouldn't let her do that.
I took control to alter her course.

However, I wouldn't take her on a night walk this time.
After about twenty minutes of walking, the target arrived at a cramped children's park.

I had her sit on one of the swings on a swingset.
Naturally, I was sitting on the other.

35.
"Hey," I raised my hand and greeted. "How was school?"

The target slowly turned toward me and glared.
"Why did you do those things?"

"You seemed lonely, so I thought I'd make you some friends."

"...Do you enjoy teasing me?"

"Yeah. Your type is the most fun to tease."

The target sighed.
"Stop with this roundabout stuff and kill me quickly, please."

I ignored her and lit a cigarette. She went on.
"Are you afraid because you're dealing with a child?
If this much makes you hesitate, you're going to have a hard time down the road."

Something seemed strange about these remarks.

36.
Thinking about it, there were many inexplicable things about her words and actions.

"I want you to make a little change to the note."
"So you were the one controlling me?"
"Shouldn't you just kill me quickly?"

Yes - as if she knew what the job of a Cleaner entailed.

I thought it over for a few seconds, then asked her.
"How much do you know?"

"...What do you mean?" Sure enough, the target feigned ignorance.

She definitely seemed to be making light of me.
Thinking it would be a good time to make the power dynamics clear, I did something a little violent.

I took over the target's body, and had her strangle herself.
Her ten delicately-made fingers dug into her thin neck.
Her pale skin gradually turned red.

I released control just before she lost consciousness.
She crouched on the ground and coughed violently for a while.

"Feel like answering now?", I asked.
The target looked up and tried to smile through tears.

"Unfortunately, that's not even a threat.
You literally can't kill me with this method, can you?
Because the moment I lost consciousness, you'd lose control."

I became convinced then that this girl knew something.

37.
The target put her hands on her knees and stood up, sitting back on the swing.
"I'll keep doing the same thing until you answer," I threatened.

"I'm excited," she said with a sober look.

I groaned.
"Enough already, answer. Just what do you know?"

After a glance at me, she turned to face forward again.
"What do I know? Well, what you're doing now is exactly what I used to do."

"...What do you mean?"

The target lightly kicked the ground and started swinging.
The chains made a creaking sound.

"I mean that I used to be on the other side of it.
I controlled targets and killed them, making it look like suicide."

38.
"I made eight people kill themselves. The targets ranged from age 19 to 72.
Six were men, two were women. I had four jump off a building.
Hanged three. The last one died by overdosing.

"I'm guessing it was the same for you, but one day, I suddenly could control people's bodies.
And at the same time, I became aware that I'd become a "Cleaner."
I saw information about a target in my head, and heard an order to eliminate them as an apparent suicide.

"I had no doubts in carrying out those orders.

"Other than the first one, I thought I did a good job.
I became fairly fond of that line of work.
Every time I made someone kill themselves, I experienced a pseudo-death, so I could feel like I was reborn."

39.
"Do you know why you were chosen as a Cleaner?"

I shook my head no.

"This is just my own guess, but I think you were chosen as a Cleaner because I abandoned my job midway.
With my ninth target, I made an easy mistake. ...I sympathized with her.
I tried to let free, even save a person I was supposed to kill."

40.
"Not long after that, I lost my powers.
Maybe I was judged to be no use. I stopped getting orders.

In fact, the target I let go ultimately committed suicide not long after.
I think my job was probably passed on to a successor Cleaner.
And my powers were also transferred to that person."

The target looked up at me and asked.
"The first target you killed after becoming a Cleaner.
Was she a tall woman, with a loose perm and sleepy eyes?"

She seemed to take my silence as affirmation.

41.
"I couldn't kill that person.
Because she was just so much like me."

She didn't say much about what she meant by "so much like me."
She just smiled lonesomely for a moment.

"I lost the power to control people half a month after I let her go.
...Of course, it wouldn't just end like that."

"It seems I haven't only lost my right to be a Cleaner - I'm also considered a person to be cleaned.
One day, my right hand started moving contrary to my thoughts, and I realized someone was controlling my body."

The target pointed at me. "That was you."

42.
"I guess I've "outlived my usefulness," huh?
It must be a system where the successor comes to erase the predecessor.
Maybe Cleaners who quit being Cleaners are treated like murderers.
And maybe there were some ex-Cleaners mixed in among the people I had killed."

"So," the target said with a smile that had given up on everything.
"I think it's best that you deal with me right away.
If you take too long, you might lose your job as a Cleaner too."

43.
So that's what it was.

This girl wanted to be killed so as to aid me, her successor as a Cleaner.

Maybe it wasn't that she lacked the courage to kill herself, but was waiting for me to kill her.
So that I could safely carry out my job as a Cleaner.

...I don't like this, I mused.
I was intending to kill her, but she was intending to save me.

44.
As if reading my thoughts, the target added:
"It's not like I'm asking you to kill me for your sake.
I never really liked living in the first place.
Between the two, I think I'd prefer to be killed and given rest quickly.
...So there's no need for hesitation in killing me, all right?"

After thinking it all over, I replied.
"Then all the more reason I really can't be killing you.
You think I'll serve as a helper who gives people rest?
I won't rest unless I can have you die full of regrets."

She looked at me emotionlessly.
"I see. So you want to fatten me up and kill me.
...But I think you'll be killed first."

"I wouldn't be so sure. It's not like I've given up on killing you.
I'm just putting it off temporarily to make for a more perfect execution."

"...Really. Well, then it might be alright."

45.
"You say you want to die quickly and be at rest..."
I crushed my cigarette under my foot to put it out.
"But can you really say you have no attachments in this world?"

"...Hmm. I wonder."

"For instance... There's that weird plant in your room.
If you die, that plant's coming with you. It'll wilt quickly.
Don't you feel bad for it? Wouldn't you feel sorry?"

There was a hint of disturbance in the target's face.
I just thought it up on the spot, but apparently that plant really was important to her.
Maybe she couldn't love people, so instead gave her affection to a plant.

I grinned.
"Guess that plant really is important, huh?"

The target pursed her lips and glared at me.

46.
"Curtisii."

"Hm?", I responded.

The target looked up and carefully enunciated.
"Aglaonema nitidum curtisii.
It's not "that plant." It has a wonderful name. Please remember it."

"That's one heck of a name for such a plain plant."
"It's a curtisii."
"Got it. Curtisii."

"Azure Skye."

I looked up at the sky. What about it?

47.
The target pointed at herself, then said it again.
"Azure. It's my name. Please remember it."

I nodded with understanding.
"Oh, your name. Yeah, I remember now."

"It's not Cloudie Skye."

"Nope, like a blue sky. Not the most fitting name, is it?"

Azure smiled serenely.
"...Actually, that's not quite true. "Blue-sky" can also mean "worthless."
In that sense, it's a perfect name for me."

48.
"Incidentally," Azure remarked, "I never asked your name."

"Claude Skye," I answered on the spot.

"...Please don't imitate me."
"No, it's true. It's an amazing coincidence."
"Hmph. Glad you've got a fitting name."

Silence fell between us.
After a while, she opened her mouth.
"...You asked everything you wanted to hear, right?
Can I leave now?"

"Yeah," I nodded.

Azure got off the swing, and after walking toward the exit some, turned around.
"Goodbye, Mr. Claude."

"Yeah. See you, Azure."

49.
After returning to the apartment, I got curious and looked up the plant Azure told me about.

Aglaonema nitidum curtisii.
It seemed like a very rare kind of plant.

Despite liking bright places, it disliked direct sunlight.
So it was a troublesome plant that needed to be grown in "a bright shadow."

50.
Every day after that, I kept controlling Azure.
At school, she always had a smile, she never missed a greeting, she listened in class, and she talked to classmates.

Azure wasn't bad-looking by any means either, so simply by making that the norm, she naturally gained affection from those around her.

The classmates' view of Azure gradually changed, and they began to frequently talk to her.
Once that happened, I controlled her less frequently, and enjoyed her reactions to the friendly classmates.

51.
"Morning, Azure!"
"Azure, let's eat lunch together!"
"What kind of music do you listen to, Azure?"
"Hey, Azure, about question 4..."
"Hey Azure, sit here!"
"I want to know more about you, Azure."
"It's fine, Azure, come on over!"
"Azure!" "Azure!" "Azure!"

"See you, Azure."
Back at home, she collapsed on the bed.

"Isn't it great how you got to talk with lots of people today?", I asked, controlling her mouth.

"...Not at all," Azure weakly replied. "You're a terrible person, Claude."

"I'm glad you think so," I said.

52.
Luckily, there was one girl who showed an understanding of Azure's hobbies.

"Huh, so you listen to that kind of music too?"

She must have been rather happy to find someone in the classroom who listened to similar music.
She would come over to Azure's desk for anything, and innocently talk about music.

Azure didn't actively speak much, but it didn't seem she was ignoring the girl.
She probably didn't dislike the topic of music.

Over time, if awkwardly, Azure became able to naturally converse with her classmates without my control.

If this kept up, the day when Azure could truly fit in the classroom didn't seem far off.
But alas, that's when summer break started.

53.
On the first day of vacation, I controlled Azure and had her go to the same park I'd taken her to before.

I sat on a bench and waited for her.
I heard cicadas from the trees surrounding the park.

Unusually, there were children playing in the park that day.
They were shouting and grabbing onto a carousel, going around and around the same places.
I watched them absentmindedly.

Though it was summer break, Azure appeared in uniform.
I suppose maybe she threw away all her casual clothes when she cleaned out her room.

As she entered the park and saw my face, Azure spoke.
"Well, are you going to kill me today?"

Then she added, proudly:
"School is on break now, so any further pestering would be impossible."

"That's not true. There are plenty of other methods."

"...Such as?" Azure tilted her head.

54.
I took over her body and searched her pockets and bag.
However, search as I did, I couldn't find the item I was looking for.
Reluctantly, I released control to ask her.
"Where's your cellphone?"

"Cellphone? I don't have one."

"You don't have a cellphone?"

"Isn't it obvious I wouldn't need something like that?
Did you really not realize until now?"

True, I'd never once seen her using a cellphone.
But I must have thought she just didn't bring it to school because of school rules.

55.
As I remained speechless from surprise, Azure asked me:
"If I did have a cellphone, what did you plan to do with it?"

"Call a classmate and invite them over."

"I see..."
Azure's eyes went round, as if to say "is inviting people over something people actually do?"
"Well, too bad for you. I don't know any of my classmates' contact info."

"...I give. I hadn't accounted for that possibility."
"How thoughtless."
"Oh well. I'll have to fill in for your classmate."

"...Um?" Azure blinked.
"Think of me as your friend and treat me accordingly."
"What are you even saying?"
"It's hot here. Let's go cool off somewhere."

I took Azure's hand and stood up from the bench.
"Um, Mr. Claude?"
Azure sought an explanation, but I ignored her.

56.
...Maybe I was fussing too much over this target.
That thought suddenly crossed my mind.
Sure, her attitude rubbed me the wrong way, but it wasn't wise to spend so much time on killing a single target.

Maybe I should have compromised around this point and killed her.
If I could afford to act like a classmate and give her enjoyment, I should probably be using that time to be terminating more targets.

There were surely many targets left to be killed, after all.

However, I found myself taking Azure to a coffee shop.
Oh well. I put it aside for the moment.
I'd already put this much into preparing. So just as I initially planned, I would thoroughly tease her until she said "I don't want to die."

57.
Once our coffee arrived, Azure immediately complained.
"I hate coffee. It's so bitter."

"Even though you drink whiskey?"
"Coffee pretty much tastes like poison."
"Spoken like a true poison-drinker."
"Yes, I have had poison. Using someone else's body, granted."

I didn't reply, so Azure said "It was a joke" with a serious face.
It was hard to ever tell how serious this girl was.

58.
After drinking her coffee, Azure seemed to remember something and spoke.

"Like I told you before, I lost my powers about half a month after letting my target go.
You should start being careful about now, Claude."

"Doesn't seem relevant to me. I don't intend on letting you free."

"You say that, but you're really just scared, aren't you?
Not brave enough to kill a child like me?"

"That cheap provocation won't work on me."

"...Coward," she said with boredom, chin in her hands.

59.
We left the coffee shop, and Azure sighed.
"Well, goodbye." She headed home.
I grabbed her collar to stop her.

"What? What is it?", Azure asked with annoyance.
"Do you want to be with me that much?"

"Yeah," I nodded.
"I told you, I want to take away every "positive" of you dying.
To do that, I want you to learn as many joys of living as you can.
Something like the sun's plan in The North Wind and the Sun."

"...Living sure is fun," Azure said in a forced way.
Naturally, I ignored it.

I walked with Azure to a small theater that caught my eye.
I felt oddly listless, maybe because of the strong sunlight that had borne down on me, so I fell asleep mere minutes into the movie.

60.
When I woke up, the movie was ending.
Seemingly something emotional happened, and the characters were making a big fuss crying about it.

After leaving the building, I asked "What was the movie like?"
Azure concisely replied, "It was about a murderer who gets a terrible punishment."

It seemed like seeing the movie gave her some things to think about.
Walking about two steps behind me, Azure spoke.
"...In movies and shows, criminals who kill people always get punished and die in the end, even if they reform."

"Yeah, it's like saying "Kill anyone who kills anyone.""
I proposed my own personal theory.
"With murder, it's like once you do once, that's it.
Even if they reform, murderers can't be forgiven until the day they die.
Only once they reform and then die will people start to say "They repented.""

61.
"Following that logic," Azure said, "is it better that we die, too?"

"I don't really think I want forgiveness, so it doesn't matter to me."

But Azure ignored me and continued.
"Somehow, that's exciting to me.
We're two youths who shouldn't be living."

"...What about it is exciting?"

"Because we're Azure and Claude."
With that, Azure looked right at my face.
I understood her intent.

62.
Those days went on for a while.

Azure stopped talking back to me so much, and would come to see me even when left alone.
Saying things like "You really like being with me, don't you, Mr. Claude?", I treated her to cakes, movies, drives, and she enjoyed them.

And occasionally, she would pull on my sleeve and say like an afterthought, "Please kill me soon."

63.
One day, we went to a summer festival.
We gazed over the festival full of people from the top of stone steps.

"You must have a lot of time on your hands to spend day after day with me.
Don't you have a girlfriend or anything?"

"Nope. I have my hands full with you."

"Don't place the blame on me."

Azure licked her anzu-ame, then asked me, still looking down at the festival:
"Hey, Mr. Claude."

"What?"
"What do you enjoy in life?"
"...What's the point in asking me that?"
"I'm one to talk, but it doesn't seem like you enjoy much about living."

I didn't care for that remark, so I responded accordingly.
"I have fun teasing you."

"...I see. That's good," Azure said, her expression unchanging.

64.
All of a sudden, I noticed a girl I'd seen somewhere climbing up the stairs.
After some time, I remembered it was a classmate of Azure's.

Seeing Azure, the classmate raised a hand to greet her, but withdrew it as soon as she noticed me beside.
And after a meaningful glance at Azure, she went back down the way she came.

After seeing the classmate leave, Azure spoke up.
"...Mr. Claude, I think you were just mistaken as my boyfriend."

I nodded slightly. "It's not exactly strange that it looks that way."

"Well, that's boring. Please, dislike it more."
"You want me to dislike it?"
"Yes. I think it should depress you."

I thought about it, then suggested this.
"Okay, next time I meet that classmate, I'll greet her acting like your boyfriend."

"...Please stop it."

Unfortunately, I never did meet that classmate again.

65.
As I was about to leave after sending Azure home that day, she grabbed my sleeve.

I stopped and turned around. "What is it?"

She hung her head in silence for a while, then finally spoke with resignation.

"I admit it."

"...Admit what?", I asked.

Azure sighed, still averting her eyes.
"I mean you got what you wanted, Mr. Claude.
Right now, I'm enjoying living a little."

66.
"Unusually honest of you," I remarked.

"...But that's all it is," she went on.
"Even if I'm happy, my desire to kill myself won't change.
In fact, day by day, my guilt increases.
The fact that I get to enjoy a nice life after killing eight people..."

After saying that, Azure looked up.
"So whatever you do, it'll be pointless."

I contemplated for a while, not making eye contact.

To tell the truth, I'd dimly been aware of that as well.
As much enjoyment as I added to her life, the fact that I couldn't remove that essential guilt might make it impossible to make her say "I don't want to die."

67.
This might be the best time, I thought.
It was unfortunate I couldn't hear her say "I don't want to die," but I was able to draw out "I'm having fun living."

Right now, maybe Azure was stricken with a sense of defeat.
Perhaps this very moment was the ideal time to kill her.

Azure spoke as if reading my thought process.
"Now, let's stop pretending to be friends."

There was a long silence.
Many thoughts swirled around in my head.

Eventually, I turned my back to Azure wordlessly, and left.

Not yet, I said to myself. It's still not the right time.
I would kill Azure once every benefit to death was gone, and she begged me for life.

68.
By this point, even I was probably faintly aware.
That I was myself becoming hesitant to kill this "target."

And perhaps it was set up so the moment I clearly realized that was when I would lose my job as a Cleaner.

By the time I noticed, it was too late.

The next day, while walking with Azure as usual under the midsummer sun, my right hand suddenly twitched involuntarily.
Being used to controlling other people, I immediately knew what it meant.

I tried to warn Azure, but it was too late.
Just as I opened my mouth, I lost control of my whole body.

I suddenly grabbed Azure's shoulders and stopped her.
She turned around in surprise. "What is it?"

69.
Aha, I acknowledged.
If I was being controlled by the Cleaner succeeding me, they would surely have Azure die first.

But there were two people who should be dead here.
Which means -

"So this means you're going to use Claude to kill me."
Azure seemed to know the score just by looking at me.

"I see... So I'm going to be killed by Claude's hand."
She spoke happily, and walked toward me, defenseless.

70.
We were in a plaza in town with a fountain.
After going into cover where people wouldn't see us, I went around behind Azure and wrapped my arm around her thick, cold neck.

Azure went limp, showing no resistance.
My arm slowly but surely applied pressure to her neck.

It was the first time I'd experienced being controlled.
Surprisingly, I hardly felt any sensation of being controlled.
I almost had the illusion that I was acting of my own volition.

71.
Force was gradually put into my arm wrapped around her neck.
I tried to resist the control, but my body wouldn't move.
However, I couldn't just let her die here.
All the effort I'd taken so long to build up was being wasted.
I still needed more time to take away all the benefits of her death.

I gave up resisting, and instead focused my mind.
Doing so, half my consciousness transferred into Azure's body.
Just as I suspected, I hadn't lost my powers yet.
Maybe only half had been passed on to my successor as of yet.

Azure still wanted me to kill her, so she desperately resisted the control.
But I managed to succeed in twisting her arm.

I took over her body and elbowed myself in the solar plexus.
I also stepped on my foot with her heel, and as my grip weakened, I flung backwards forcefully with all my weight.
As my head struck the ground, I temporarily lost consciousness, and immediately afterward, I was freed from the control.

72.
As I tried to get up, pain shot through my entire body.
It was a kind of pain I'd never experienced thus far.
Maybe it was because of my resistance against the control.
I felt like all my muscles had gotten turned inside-out.

Azure sat up, coughing.
"Are you okay?"

"No, not very okay," I replied.

She laughed. "I bet your body really hurts, huh?"

"Yeah. So this is what happens when you resist?"

"That's right. You should suffer in it for a while."

Then she lowered her gaze and asked quietly.
"Hey, Claude. Did I smell sweaty?"

"Sweaty?", I repeated. "No, not at all."

"Good. ...Sheesh, if I knew this was going to happen, I would have put on perfume."
She came moments away from dying, yet was still concerned with the most pointless things.

73.
I couldn't just lie on the ground forever, so I put my hands on the ground and slowly stood up.
My whole body screamed, and a cold sweat poured.

The reflection off the pavement only added to the heat.
I decided to sit on the edge of the fountain and rest until the pain withdrew.

But once I finally made it over there and sat down, I had a dizzy spell, and fell into the fountain a moment later.

I stuck my head out of the water and wiped my face.
I had the attention of the people in the plaza.
Azure was holding her stomach laughing.

I put my hands down on the floor, sat in the water, and looked up at the sky.
An airplane trail stretched across the blue sky.

74.
Two crows on a nearby tree looked at me.
They looked like they were watching their soon-to-be prey.

"What are you even doing?", Azure asked, laughing.
"Is someone controlling you again?"

"Who cares? It's refreshing," I replied.
"Please, my whole body hurts. Don't make me laugh."
"Go on, laugh yourself to death."
"Aren't you soaked?"

Then Azure stood at the edge of the fountain and lept into the water beside me.

A splash went up, and I covered my eyes.
The people in the plaza looked toward us again.

75.
Azure didn't come up after ten seconds, so I helped her get up.
She was acting like it was fine, but it seemed her body had taken equal or greater damage to mine.

I remarked upon her, soaked from head to toe.
"It'll raise some eyebrows if people see "High School Girl Drowns in Fountain" on the news."

"It's fine. After all, Claude, you definitely won't allow such a death," she said after coughing some.
"Isn't that right?"

"...Well, yeah."

"I trust you to that."
Azure grinned.

76.
We soaked in the cold water for a while.
"Claude, does your body still hurt?"

"...Yeah. Especially my hands. They're still numb."
"I see."

With that, Azure crept closer to me in the water, and still looking aside, wordlessly took my hand.
She probably thought I wouldn't notice since they were numb.

I decided not to point it out.
I figured I'd let her do what she wanted now, then ridicule her later.

77.
Still holding my hand but feigning ignorance, Azure spoke.
"But really, why do you think there's been no followup?"

"Who knows. I can't even guess," I lied.
I didn't let her catch even the slightest whiff of the fact that I'd been hearing a relentless command to "kill her right this moment."

This is what I was thinking.
Perhaps it's not too late yet.
That attack earlier was no more than a warning.
The fact that I still had my powers was better proof than any.

If I responded to that warning by obeying and killing Azure, I'd probably be removed as a target, and could return to being a Cleaner.

However, I just couldn't feel like doing that.
So I pretended not to notice this warning.

78.
Once the heat in our bodies had withdrawn, we got out of the fountain and wrung out our clothes.
Dripping water, we walked over to a bench in the sun, and sat down to dry them off.

Soon enough, a 5-o'-clock chime rang out through the plaza.
By then, if not sooner, our clothes had completely dried.

I slowly stood up and spoke.
"I'm exhausted. I should head home. See you, Azure."

Azure was about to say something, but swallowed her words as if rethinking it.
Instead, she gave her usual farewell.
"Right. Goodbye, Mr. Claude."

Azure seemed just a little reluctant as we parted.
I think she must have understood.
How it was rather likely this could be our final farewell.

79.
I intended to never meet Azure again.
I wouldn't really mind if she were killed by my successor.
However, I hated being used as a tool to kill Azure like today.
Yes, I hated being used by others more than anything.

If my body was taken over again, that would probably be the end of me.
They backed down easily today, so I was able to escape safely.
But if they struck again truly intending to kill me, there was nothing I could do.
Having buried six people as a Cleaner, I knew that for sure.

I stayed up in my apartment, waiting for the day my judgement would be handed down.
But surprisingly enough, peaceful days continued for a week afterward.

My controlling abilities remained as ever.

80.
I had devoted most of my time this month toward pestering Azure.
So without her around, I immediately felt like I had nothing to do.

When I woke up in the morning, like a habit, I was thinking about Azure.
"Now, how shall I torment Azure today?"

Whenever I did, I rebuked myself.
"Idiot, you don't have to think about her anymore."

Then another me in my head shot back.
"Well, then what should I think about?"

I didn't have an answer to that question.
Before long, I realized the ironic truth.
"Taking away everything Azure would want to die for" had somehow become the thing I lived most for.

Having lost what I lived for, my vitality suddenly tanked.
If you're going to kill me, get it over with quickly, I muttered in desperation.

81.
Ten days passed after I parted from Azure.

Then one day, a doubt suddenly crossed my mind.
...On what basis were "targets" selected?

I went down the line recalling the six targets I'd killed.
And I couldn't find any common points that you could really say were in common.

So maybe there were no requirements for targets to be targeted except that they'd committed a crime.

82.
However.
When I tired of pondering those six targets, and returned to thinking about Azure -
All those scattered points formed into a single line.

Until this point, I'd thought of "targets" and "Cleaners" separately.
This mistaken pretense had been obscuring the truth.

The common point between the seven, Azure included.
No, maybe I should say between the eight, myself included.

My realization must have been the impetus.

Suddenly, "it" happened a second time.

83.
"...You took your sweet time," I said casually.
The next moment, I'd lost complete control over my body.

My body began to move on its own.
It skillfully sorted out the things in my room, put them into garbage bags, and took several trips between the garbage collection and the apartment.
Soon, my room was nearly empty.

With the cleanup complete, my body headed for a hardware store, where it purchased a thick rope and liquid soap.
The successor Cleaner must have intended to hang me.

84.
I was made to head for an old shrine on the edge of town.
Finding a sturdy tree, I took the rope out of the shopping bag and tied it around a branch, tightly, so it wouldn't come loose.

Then I made a loop to put my head in.
I tied what's known as a "hangman's knot."
I'd used it to kill targets myself several times.

Furthermore, the Cleaner rubbed soap both on the rope and my neck.
This too was a common practice for hanging, to reduce friction and better ensure the rope ate into the neck.

My last moments were steadily approaching.
However, my mind wasn't dominated by terror, but relief that "now I won't have to kill Azure."

It sounds strange, but I couldn't even think of anything else.

85.
In no time, the preparations for a hanging were all in order.
Controlled by the Cleaner, I went to the shrine's storage room and brought back a case of beer.

Setting the case on the ground and standing on it as a pedestal, I put both hands on the noose.

All of a sudden, I thought of a little pestering I wanted to try on this Cleaner, my successor.

I resisted control to open my mouth.
"Hey, you, Cleaner controlling me," I called.
"Give me five minutes - no, two. Won't you hear me out?"

Sure enough, the Cleaner paid no heed to me, and continued trying to hang me.
But I resisted it with all my might and continued.

86.
"I'm an ex-Cleaner. I used to kill target after target and pass it off as suicide, just like you.
But since I couldn't kill my seventh target, I was disqualified as a Cleaner, and now I'm the one to be killed.

"The girl I was with before? That was my seventh target.
She was a Cleaner before too, but couldn't kill her ninth target, so she ended up on the other side.
That's how this is set up. You stop killing, you get killed.

"I don't have a clue why it's set up this way, but I can say one thing.
And that's that as long as you keep being a Cleaner, you're bound to meet someone you can't kill.

"It happened to me, it happened to my predecessor...
And her predecessor, their predecessor's predecessor - to everyone, I'm sure.
You're going to meet a target you just aren't able to kill someday."

Like Azure was to me.

"That's going to be your downfall."

With that, I flashed a grin.

87.
I'd hit my limit as far as resisting control.
Soon, my body was completely taken over again.

I put my head in the noose, and kicked away the pedestal.

The rope strangled my neck, my legs cut through the air, and my body swayed.
The supply of oxygen to my brain quickly made my senses hazy.
I could hear only the squeaking of the rope with odd clarity.

The last thing in my mind was Azure's face.
The various expressions I'd witnessed in these few weeks appeared and vanished rapidly.

In my dimming consciousness, I finally became aware.

...I see. I was in love with her.

Immediately afterward, my senses cut out.

88.
I woke up to a sea of green.
I heard a voice above me, but I couldn't really make it out.

Gradually, my eyes focused.
I realized I was lying down on the ground.
The green filling my vision was thick weeds.

"Hey, you okay?", someone said above me.
I slowly sat up, but felt dizzy.

Seems like it went well, I sighed with relief.

"Good, you're alive...", said the man dressed like a farmer who'd saved me.
He was holding pruning shears in one hand.
He'd used them to cut the rope.

89.
Of course, it was not by chance that he found me.
Just before I was hung, while talking to stall for time, I controlled this man to bring him over.

So that I would be saved right after losing consciousness.
And equipping him with shears from the nearby storehouse.

My Cleaner successor would be convinced I was dead.
This should buy me some time.
Though who knows what good stalling for time would do.

90.
The middle-aged man who saved me looked at me worriedly.
"Hey, kid, can't you do that somewhere else?
It'll be trouble if there's a suicide in our area."

I removed the noose around my neck and sighed.
Then without even thanking the man, I hurried off.

To be specific, it wasn't that I didn't thank him, but that I couldn't.
Resisting the control had given me throbbing pain in many places.
My vocal chords were especially shot from forcing myself to speak.

Stumbling around in the white heat-haze, I dimly thought, of course, about Azure.

Maybe she'd already been killed by now.

91.
I arrived at the apartment, opened the door, went inside, and threw myself on the bed without undressing.

The room was horribly humid, but I didn't even have the energy to turn on the AC.
My throat was parched, but it would be an ordeal just to get up and go to the kitchen.

Pain and fatigue felt like they made up the entirety of the world.
I was unable to think about anything else.

Maybe I should have just let myself be killed if it was going to be like this, I regretted.
Or maybe I'll go and die before my successor kills me, even.

For a long time, I didn't even stir, still as a corpse.

"Azure," I unconsciously muttered.

"Yes?", came a reply.

92.
Forgetting my pain, I jumped up and looked around.
There was a familiar girl at the entrance.

She closed the door behind her, looked at me, and smiled.
"Long time no see, Mr. Claude.
Do you remember me? I'm Azure."

Then she walked around the room like it belonged to her, took a can of beer from the fridge, and started drinking.

Relieved, I lied on the bed again.
It seemed all my energy was leaving me.

After emptying a long can of beer, Azure walked over to me unsteadily.
Her face was slightly red, and she seemed drunk.

"I hadn't seen you at all lately, Claude, so I came to see you."

93.
"...You seem kind of out of it today, huh?", Azure said, sitting on the bed and looking down at me.
"Were you lonely without me?"

I shot her a glare of "save it for later."

"A glare won't scare me. You can't actually move, can you?
Oh, is that what happened? A Cleaner nearly killed you, but you were scared to die, so you barely escaped with your life?"

Seeing my expression, Azure realized her conjecture was correct, and poked my shoulder with a cheerful smile.
"I knew it. To tell the truth, same here.
So I couldn't move all day yesterday from the pain.
I was just like you are right now, Mr. Claude."

Seeing I didn't show any resistance to her poking, Azure grinned, having an idea.
"This is a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity."

94.
Azure heaved my body up, went around behind me, and wrapped her right arm around my neck.

"This is payback for when you strangled me," she said.

But she didn't put much force into her arm, making it feel like she was just hugging me from behind.

When I'd felt it before, Azure's body had been cold, but today it was strangely warm.

There was a comfortable silence.

"Since I'm drunk...", Azure said into my ear.
"Since I'm drunk, I might say some weird stuff, but that's because I'm drunk. So don't worry about it."

95.
"So... Why haven't you been pestering me lately?"

Azure buried her face in my back and muttered.
Her arms dropped down, crossing in front of my chest.

"Why haven't you been messing with me?
Why are you letting me do as I please?
Follow after me, please. Take me around, please.
Get in my way, please. Trouble me, please."

Azure's index finger poked my chest.

"I was kind of lonely, you know?
And I like being lonely.
So please, interfere with that.
Isn't that kind of thing your duty, Claude?"

96.
With great trouble, I twisted my body to face Azure.
And to explain how I was temporarily unable to reply due to losing the ability to speak, I made an X over my mouth with my fingers.

Azure seemed to misunderstand.
"If you say I can't, that just makes me want it more."
Then she put her lips on the spot I indicated.

After throwing my feelings into chaos with that, she fell sound asleep.
I sighed and shrugged my shoulders.

Then I silently thought, "I'm glad I didn't die back there."

97.
Watching Azure as she slept, I pondered.

When exactly did I fall for her?
Did I become attached as we spent summer break together?

No, that probably wasn't it, I thought.

I was captivated by Azure from the start.
From the moment I knew her as my seventh target.

I kept coming up with all these reasons to put off killing Azure, but ultimately, it was simply because I was in love with her.

Because she was just so much like me.

98.
Listening to Azure sleep made me sleepy too, so I ruffled her hair and lied down next to her.

Then my mind turned to the six targets I'd killed.
Perhaps among them was a person who was precious to someone else - a person who was someone else's Azure.
That thought made me terribly sad.

I guess I'd done something there was no taking back.
All too late, I felt the weight of my sins.
Azure probably felt this way when she met me, too.

When I woke up, the pain had left my body.
As I took a beer from the fridge and drank it, Azure slowly sat up.

"How long are you going to be borrowing the bed?", I asked.

"Good morning." Azure rubbed her eyes and grinned at me.

As I drank the beer, I said "Get out of here soon," but she shook her head sleepily.

99.
Azure sat with her legs crossed on the bed, and for a while, was silent.
She was probably thinking back on her actions before she fell asleep.

Azure suddenly hung her head and muttered.
"Um... Sorry for being clingy earlier."

"Ah, so you do remember."

"Oh, whoops. I should've said I forgot."
Azure held her head, behaving as if she'd made a mistake there.
Then she lifted her head and pointed at my beer.
"Claude, give me some beer too.
This time I'll get really drunk and do things I won't remember."

"Get going already. Time's a-wasting."

"You mean time to get wasted," Azure said, and laughed to herself. "No, I won't leave."

100.
Oh well. I gave up on persuading her.
Thinking about it, both Azure and I were already slated for death.
Any moment now, we could have our bodies taken over and made to commit suicide.
What good would sending her home now do?

Maybe through her actions, Azure was telling me this:
"We have no future ahead of us, so can't we at least be honest at the end?"

We sat on the bed together, lying against the wall, listening to silence in the unlit room.

"Hey, Azure," I said.
"I'm only asking this because I'm drunk, but..."

"Don't imitate me," Azure said with a laugh. "What is it?"

"What's the number one thing I could do to pester you?"

She opened her eyes and looked at me intently.
"Claude, you want to know the way to make me happy?"

"You might be able to phrase it that way, too."

Then Azure spoke with a gentle smile.
"Well, that would be making you happy, Claude.
Your happiness is my happiness.
In other words, the number one way to pester me is for you to be happy."

101.
Then Azure asked me.
"Hey, Claude, I've been thinking... I don't really know anything about you.
Like... I like music, for example.
But you knew that already, right?"

"Yeah, I saw your music. Your taste isn't bad."

"...Claude complimented me...", Azure said with exaggerated emotion.
"...Ah, er, back on topic. Is there anything you like?
I want to know the way to make you happy, Claude."

102.
I opened my mouth, but couldn't think of an appropriately answer-like answer.
I'd only thought about Azure these past weeks, so it seems I completely forgot any wishes and desires of my own.

No, maybe that's not the problem, I reconsidered.
Thinking about it, even before I became a Cleaner, I was indifferent to my own happiness.
I lived a life without any enjoyment-esque enjoyment.

Maybe over twenty years of life, the only thing I could really say I truly enjoyed was teasing Azure.

For the first time in my life, I thought seriously about my happiness.

103.
"You're hopeless," Azure observed, and sent me aid.
"It can be anything. Just try listing things you like."

I did as she said, listing off things that came to mind.
Clocks. Ferris wheels. Music boxes. Windmills. Sunflowers. Merry-go-rounds.

After thinking for a while, Azure said this.
"In other words, Claude, you like things that slowly revolve."

"Things that slowly revolve...", I repeated.
Indeed, they were all things that slowly turned over time.
"Yeah. I guess I must like things that slowly revolve."

Then Azure pointed to herself.
"Or me? Which do you like more?"

What was she talking about? I tilted my head.

Azure pointed at herself again and repeated.
"Slowly-revolving things or me."

"The former," I replied.

"...Well then, I present slowly-revolving me."
Azure stood up and began to leisurely spin.

104.
Before I knew it, I was holding Azure's shoulders and embracing her.

She whispered, surprised. "Just had to give it a try..."

After spending sufficient time with Azure after ten days apart, I let go, and she said "Hey, Claude."
"Once dawn comes, let's go out somewhere together."

"Go out?", I repeated. "Where?"

"There's somewhere I want to take you."

"Which is...?"

"It's a secret."
She put her finger to her lips mischievously.
"Finding out when you arrive will be part of the fun."

"Got it," I nodded.

After that, we had a brief nap until dawn.

105.
Waking up the next morning, I noticed I'd lost my manipulation abilities.
But that was meaningless to me at this point.
The girl in front of me would grant my wishes without any manipulation.

Azure woke up a few minutes later, and after a light breakfast, I drove the car following her directions.

"You sure know a lot about this town's geography."
"Yeah. I went lots of places on my own, looking for appropriate places to kill targets," Azure said casually.

"Why did you do all that?"
"Isn't that obvious? To make it look more suicide-like."

"...Appropriate places, huh? Never even thought about it.
I just had them kill themselves in random places nearby."

"Which do you suppose is right?"

"As if there's a "right" way to do it.
Maybe it just comes down to viewing suicide as an active or passive action?"

"I see," Azure nodded.

106.
I knew it was our first destination even before Azure informed me "We've arrived."

Stopping the car on the side of the road and traveling a little ways, I found a large field of sunflowers below.

There were a number of windmills past the field, leisurely spinning in the wind.

Looking up further, past the clear sky, I saw cumulonimbus clouds of staggering size.

"What do you think?", Azure asked. "Slowly revolving, right?"

"Yeah," I agreed.
It really was a scene tailored to my tastes.

We leaned on a fence, letting the view soak into our eyes.
Mixed in among the sound of cicadas buzzing like ears ringing, I heard trains chugging along.

Even though it wouldn't be a surprise to get killed at any moment then, maybe that's exactly why I could feel so at peace.

107.
"...Hey, Claude."
Azure suddenly broke the silence.
"Why did it have to be us?"

I immediately knew she was referring to the basis for selecting Cleaners, because I'd been thinking the exact same thing at that same moment.

After some hesitation, I began like this.
"...I heard this story once."

"Centuries ago, in some country I can't remember...
When there wasn't anyone in the land who wanted to be an executioner, apparently they chose criminals from death row.

"As long as the criminal chosen as executioner did their job, their execution would be postponed.
But if they refused to do the execution even once, they'd be killed immediately, and another executioner was chosen from the criminals."

"I've heard that story too," Azure nodded.
"But what about it?"

After a breath, I spoke.
"Maybe what's going on with us is something similar."

Azure thought about it briefly, then asked with confidence.
"...You mean we were already sentenced to death?"

"Yeah," I confirmed.
"We didn't get the death sentence because we abandoned our duties as executioners.
Rather, we got temporarily exempted from our sentence by becoming executioners.
Things make more sense thinking of it that way."

108.
"As for the criteria for being sentenced to death..."
I quietly spoke my theory.
"I'm wondering if the requirement is "longing to be killed by someone.""

"It's true that I was longing to be killed, but..."
Azure looked at my face.
"Did you have that desire too, Claude?"

"Yeah. I couldn't have thought of this if I didn't."

"Why?" She tilted her head.

"Same as you. I never really liked living much."

109.
"Thinking about it in those terms and looking back on the people I killed, I noticed they all more or less had a sort of desperation...
Or, that they were somehow similar to you, Azure."

Azure thought about it and spoke.
"In other words, this "murder relay" came into existence to give relief to people who longed to die?"

"Well, that's just how I imagine it. Absolutely no proof.
And even trying to explain such an irrational, curse-like, supernatural phenomenon with logic is foolish."

"...But, if that is the truth..."
Azure paused for a moment.

"It's all kind of lonesome."

Very, very lonesome, I agreed.

110.
"People who want to be killed get killed.
That's a system to be grateful for... but it has a flaw."

"Because there are people like me or you, who realize the joy of living as late as when they're almost killed."

"That's right," I affirmed.
"It'd be nice if someday, somewhere, this cycle can be stopped."

"...But I think it's a good thing I was sentenced to death."

"Why?"

"Because it let me meet you, Claude."
She smiled at me.
Now that you mention it, maybe, I silently agreed.

111.
Azure counted on her fingers.
"Clocks, music boxes, windmills, sunflowers, merry-go-rounds, Ferris wheels... that's it, right?"

"Yeah," I said. "Good memory."

"We've succeeded at sunflowers and windmills, so let's move on."

I asked in surprise, "Are you planning to take me to all of them?"

"That's right. I had a very good idea.
There's a place full of things you like, Claude."

Azure got down off the fence and landed on the ground.
"Let's head out. The next one is kind of far."

I think she probably wanted to continue and say this:
...Because we don't know how much time we have left.

112.
Following her direction of "straight down the highway," I continued to drive.

The sky that was so clear in the morning was gradually covered by heavy clouds.

Soon, Azure started to snooze away.
I turned down the AC in the car, lowered the radio volume, and drove carefully so she didn't wake.

While waiting at lights, I glanced at Azure in the passenger seat.
...Suddenly, I felt a strange illusion.
I felt like these days would go on forever.

Of course, it was only an illusion, and our lives could be lost this very moment.
But with that illusion as a jumping-off point, my imagination went wild.
If we could keep living long after this, what kind of happiness would await us?

I hurried to push those ideas out of my mind.
There's nothing as pointless as thinking about "if's" that can never happen.

113.
I began to speak to Azure as she slept soundly.
"...I've been thinking, these past few days.
About what if you'd appeared to me sooner.
If you had, maybe we wouldn't want anyone to kill us, and we'd avoid any involvement in this stupid cycle."

I stopped there, took a slow breath, and continued.

"I know I shouldn't be thinking that way.
Maybe this was the only way we could have met, and because we met this way, we can have this kind of relationship.
...But even knowing that, I can't help thinking about it.
How nice it'd be if this time lasted forever."

Soon, Azure woke up and resumed giving me directions.
Looking at my face, she noticed something was amiss.
"You don't look so well, Claude."

"Just your imagination. The weather's bad, so my face looks bad too."

But Azure seemed to see right through my lie.
She reached over from the passenger seat and stroked my face. "There, there."

114.
About three hours after leaving the sunflower field, Azure told me we'd reached our destination.

It was an antiquated department building.
The kind where after shopping with your family, you had curry and cream soda at the food court on the top floor.
It retained that exact mood from decades ago.

"A rooftop amusement part?", I repeated back.
"Yes, a rooftop amusement park," Azure replied.
"An anachronism like that still exists?"

"Yes. Isn't it wonderful?"
Azure told me it would be full of things that I liked.

115.
Entering the store, Azure proposed we split up briefly.
"Can you get a coffee at the food court or something and wait?"

"Sure, but why?"

"I need to make some small preparations."

I followed her instruction and headed for the top floor alone.

It had been a long time since I went to a department store, come to think of it.
It might have been over a decade since I last went.

I bought a meal ticket and sipped coffee as I waited for Azure.

116.
Maybe Azure had been killed immediately after she left me.
Just as that worry began to rear its head, she appeared on cue.

"Now, let's go," she said.
I didn't ask her what her preparations were for.

We found ourselves walking hand in hand, neither having really initiated it.
Our destination was, of course, the rooftop amusement park.

117.
Immediately as we arrived on the roof, loud music began to fill the area.

It was the sound of a clock tower just above us.
We looked at it. The clock dial opened up, and a band of dolls inside began performing.

As we watched the gimmick clock, I felt a cold sensation on my skin.
I raised up my hand, then looked up at the sky.

It was rain.

It was still weak, but the way it fell, it seemed it would gradually pick up.

"It's raining. Well, we'd better get on quickly."
Azure pointed between the merry-go-round and Ferris wheel.

118.
The rooftop amusement park may have been somewhat antiquated, but it was a much more decent park that I expected.

The Ferris wheel was large, with over thirty gondolas, and the merry-go-round wasn't the common child's-play kind, but a very elaborately-made one.

I was personally satisfied just watching them, but Azure wouldn't take no for an answer and bought tickets for us both.

We got in a carriage, sitting across from each other.
A flute sounded out, and the carriages began to move along with music.

Azure leaned over from her seat and asked me:
"You said you'd kill me in "a very terrible way," didn't you?"

"I sure did say that."

"What kind of way was that?"

119.
I thought briefly, then answered.
"Like I said before, I won't kill you in a simple way.
I'll kill you slowly, taking plenty of time.
Teaching you the joys of living, taking all the benefits of dying, making you fear death, then killing you."

"About how much time is "plenty"?"

"In your case, it seems it'll be difficult to remove all the benefits of death.
It could be a decade, two decades. As much as a century, depending."

"Ahaha. Even though in truth, it's only taken a month."

"Nah, I'm a perfectionist. I won't be satisfied with this little progress."

120.
As expected, the rain slowly grew more severe.
The people on the rooftop gradually took refuge inside.
We got off the merry-go-round and rushed over to the Ferris wheel.

As the gondola reached about half height, Azure mumbled something.
"I'd like to be killed over the course of a century."

"I was hoping for the same."
"But I think it'd be difficult."
"After all, it's kind of strange that we're even living right now."
"Sigh. Is there nothing we can do to escape it?"

I shook my head silently.
But Azure folded her arms and kept thinking.

121.
"How does this sound?"
With the gondola at about two-thirds height, Azure looked up and spoke.

"Claude, tell me the established procedure for making a target commit suicide."

I read out the sentences etched into my head.

1. Take over the target's body.
2. Hint at suicide.
3. Tidy up the room.
4. Write a note.
5. Commit suicide.

"Right. And obstructing step 1 seems substantially difficult.
But what about trying desperately to stop step 2?"

122.
"If someone becomes so happy that a Cleaner can't hide it with any amount of effort, wouldn't any attempt at hinting at suicide be unconvincing, making step 3 forever unreachable?"

Of course, she wasn't saying it seriously.
She just indulged in imagining a happy future that wouldn't come, and took that theory out of it.

I went along with her suggestion.
"I see. That's true, a Cleaner does have a duty to make the target's death look like suicide."

"Right? In that case, we really need to get happier and happier."

"The problem is," I said, "I kind of have trouble imagining anything happier than this."

Azure averted her eyes bashfully.
"Um, Claude... You're not thinking hard enough.
I can think of more. More happy things ahead of us."

123.
The gondola finally reached the top.
From there, we had a full view of the rain-soaked town.

Still looking out the window, Azure continued.
"First of all, I'll go to the same college at you.
I'll study my hardest and be your junior."

"With your current grades, you're really gonna have to try."

"It's all right. I know you'll help me.
And once I'm your junior, we'll go to coffee shops together, see movies, and drink.
Not as a Cleaner and target this time, but as lovers.
And that's not all. If you want, I'd gladly do a lot more lover-like things.

"And also, every year, we'll go visit the graves of the people we killed.
It's not like that passing effort will make up for our sins, but we should do it.
We'll reflect deeply on our actions, and not live too flashily, but not be more abject than necessary, and live strongly.
...Yes, we'll live in a bright shadow."

124.
By the time we got off the Ferris wheel, the rain was pouring down.
The park staff was putting covers over the unprotected attractions.

The wet pavement glittered in many colors, reflecting from the light off the attractions.
The music in the park stopped, and a strange silence enveloped the roof.

Without umbrellas, we gazed at the scene, and continued to talk about the fantasies we discussed on the Ferris wheel.

I think there are some things in this world you can only say properly in the middle of pouring rain.

We were a couple without a future, forever talking about happiness we were too late to have.

125.
As the conversation came to a close, Azure muttered, "...Oh, right."
She produced a small package from her bag.

Before she opened it, I knew what was inside.

Azure handed it to me.
It was a cylinder music box inside a wooden box.

"That makes all of the things you like, Claude."

"Try playing it," she said.

I turned the music box's key, and placed it in my palm.
The cylinder rotated, and by the pins hitting the comb teeth, it began to play.

We listened to it closely.

126.
The music box slowed in tempo, finally stopping.
The sound of rain that had left my senses returned.

"Azure," I called.

"Yes?" She turned up her gaze and smiled.

I gently hugged Azure and stroked her head.

"Thank you."

"No, thank you."

Azure put her arms around my back and stroked it.

"Thank you very much."

Just then, the music box suddenly played just one more measure.
A spring that hadn't come loose must have just moved.

If only these days could last forever, I thought again.

But as it turned out, that was our final day.

127.
Well then... It may feel sudden, but the story ends here.

The girl I met that sunny July day was a girl with nervous eyes.

So delicate, she might break if you pushed her.
So pale, she might stain if you touched her.
And always looking out at something far in the distance.

That's the kind of girl I fell in love with.

The end.